

Interview with Joseph Nechvatal by Peter Macsovszky for *kloaka* 1/2011 Czech Magazine

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Inteligentné umenie nemusí byť antisietnicové



Peter Macsovszky: I think your surname will immediately attract the attention of Slovak and Czech readers. Have you any ancestors from the former Czechoslovakia? If so – do you speak Czech?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, my family roots are in Czechoslovakia. My father's parents came to Chicago from the Czech Republic and my mother's parents came from the Slovak countryside. My parents were born in Chicago - and that is where I was born and brought up. They did not speak Czech with their parents and so it was not passed down to me and my brothers and sisters. So I do not speak Czech, but I am a big fan of Czech food, as my Grandmother would cook it for us on Sundays.

Peter Macsovszky: You have stated that you are inspired by the computer viruses. Are you fascinated also by real viruses?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, the scientific images of biological viruses are very interesting. They can appear very painterly. But I was drawn to this theme socially

and psychologically.

Peter Macsovszky: The sentence “Language is a virus” came from William Burroughs and also Laurie Anderson has a song with this title. According to Burroughs that sentence means that the language came from outer space. What is your interpretation?

Joseph Nechvatal: Burroughs here is creating a fictional story of how monkeys came to speak. I take it as fascinating literature, but no more than that. Creative writing has certain liberties.

Peter Macsovszky: You are surely open to literary inspirations. Can you name authors who mean for you a constant source of inspiration?

Joseph Nechvatal: Burroughs, Thomas Mann, Georges Bataille, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Aldous Huxley, Henry Miller, Marcel Proust. Raymond Roussel, André Breton and Vladimir Nabokov.

Peter Macsovszky: And in art? Who or what has influenced you most?

Joseph Nechvatal: Marcel Duchamp, Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock, John Horton Conway (particularly his *Game of Life*), by the general cellular automata work of John von Neumann, by the genetic programming algorithms of John Koza and the auto-destructive art of Gustav Metzger.

Peter Macsovszky: Auto-destructive art! You surely know Rudolf Schwarzkogler’s works. What do you think about them?

Joseph Nechvatal: I think that Rudolf Schwarzkogler and the Viennese Actionists’ disposition to move away from Abstract Expressionist action painting in the 1960s and towards the performance oriented tendency of *Actionism*, the Viennese Actionists were very much in stride with the significant art of their era, impelled, as they were, by a Herculean sense of immersive idealism¹ based on a felt necessity for emancipation from what they saw as the repressive constraints of church and state power. Consequently their Actions were intentionally insightful: deliberately exhibitionist, abhorrent, sexist, and/or sacrilegious.

¹ For more on this topic, see my book *Towards an Immersive Intelligence* <http://www.edgewisepress.com/EP22nechvatal.htm>. A review of *Towards an Immersive Intelligence* has been published in the May issue of the Brooklyn Rail here: <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2010/05/books/immersion-infinity-and-the-quality-of-life>

Though this seems an overly naive belief to us now, it did provide the idealistic engine to what became a body of incredible work. In the early 1960s the Actionists Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Alfons Schilling and Rudolf Schwarzkogler began sensing their late connection with the Abstract Expressionist movement when already the arbitrary nature of personal subjective expression was beginning to become apparent in the repetitions of what became the Abstract Expressionist gestural formula. What was originally hailed as a new common language, gestural abstraction, began by the time the Actionists engaged in it to degenerate into a self-indulgent, dipsomaniac activity in the hands of the more recent Abstract Expressionist neophytes. To their credit the Actionist artists began to see that the total reliance on Abstract Expressionism's subjective feeling of personal assertion (which surprisingly began to look ever more and more similar) meant that Abstract Expressionism's message of immediacy and physicality was arbitrary. To counterbalance this the Actionists, in a peculiarly comparative manner to the Pop - and especially the Fluxus artists - aimed to produce art closer to "real life" and to re-mix aspects of reality into their art. Thus they moved away from Abstract Expressionist ideology and eventually towards a greater "objectivity" of "real life" which in turn led to the urge to challenge the power structures of church and state. Therefore the Actionists moved art away from represented conflict (as recorded on the Abstract Expressionist canvas) and towards political conflicts and social associations in life between people.

Peter Macsovszky: Along with visual art works you also compose musical pieces. Your music is not only a product of non-conventional, creative approach, but it also requires creative listening. What kind of instruments and subjects (motives) are you using? Who is the most important composer for you? What type of music are you listening?

Joseph Nechvatal: I am following the traditions of Fluxus and John Cage. Generally speaking, I am interested in *Noise Music*: a term used to describe varieties of avant-garde music and sound art that may use elements such as cacophony, dissonance, atonality, noise, indeterminacy, and repetition in their realization. Noise art music can feature distortion,² various types of acoustically or electronically generated noise, randomly produced electronic signals, and non-traditional musical instruments. Noise music may also incorporate manipulated recordings, static, hiss and hum, feedback, live machine sounds, custom noise software, circuit bent instruments, and non-musical vocal elements that push noise towards the ecstatic. The Futurist art movement was important for the development of the noise aesthetic,³ as was the Dada art movement⁴ (a prime example being the *Antisymphony* of Jefym

²Often using scratched, warped, defective, damaged aspects of recording technology

³ Lazlo Moholy-Nagy in 1923 recognized the unprecedented efforts of the Italian Futurists to broaden our perception of sound using noise. In an article in *Der Sturm* #7, he outlined the fundamentals of his own experimentation: "I have suggested to change the gramophone from a reproductive instrument to a productive one, so that on a record without prior acoustic information, the acoustic information, the acoustic phenomenon itself originates by engraving the necessary Ritzchriftreihen (etched grooves)." He presents detailed descriptions for manipulating discs, creating "real sound forms" to train people to be "true music receivers and creators." Source: UbuWeb Papers *A Brief history of Anti-Records and Conceptual Records* by Ron Rice

⁴ "Dada applies itself to everything, and yet it is nothing, it is the point where the yes and the no and all the opposites meet, not solemnly in the castles of human philosophies, but very simply at street corners, like dogs and grasshoppers." From Tristan Tzara's "Dada Manifesto" [1918] and "Lecture on Dada" [1922],

Golyscheff performed by Hannah Höch in Berlin on April 30th, 1919 with kitchen utensils)⁵ - and later the Surrealist and Fluxus art movements, specifically the Fluxus artists Joe Jones, Yasunao Tone, George Brecht, Wolf Vostell, Yoko Ono, Walter De Maria's *Ocean Music*, La Monte Young, Robert Watts,⁶ Takehisa Kosugi and Milan Knizak's *Broken Music*.⁷

In much the same way the early modernists were inspired by naïve art, some contemporary digital art noise musicians are excited by the archaic audio technologies such as wire-recorders, the 8-track cartridge, and vinyl records. Many artists not only build their own noise-generating devices, but even their own specialized recording equipment and custom software (for example, the C++ software used in creating my *viral symphony*).⁸

I listen to a lot of different music, but lately I have been listening to the music of Trentemøller, Pierre Schaeffer, Alva Noto, Edgard Varèse, Luigi Russolo, John Cage, Erik Satie, Rhys Chatham, Pierre Boulez, Yoko Ono, Oval, Boards of Canada, Karlheinz Stockhausen, G.M. Koenig, Pierre Henry, Iannis Xenakis, La Monte Young and Dziga Vertov. I love Flamenco and Trance too.

Peter Macsovszky: Are you familiar with the works of Laurie Anderson?

Joseph Nechvatal: Oh indeed yes. Her fusion of art and technology inspired me very much. I stayed in her loft on Canal Street when she was in Europe a long time ago in the late 70s. I remember her awaking me very sweetly when she came home unexpectedly. She and her work are a great inspiration.

Peter Macsovszky: You also use digital and robotic technologies in your art. Can you give more details how you use the robotic technologies in your art?

Joseph Nechvatal: What is valued in my robotic approach is the practice of so-called "pure" visuality over material texture when it comes to painting. This value is manifest through the strict flatness achieved in my computer-robotic assisted

translated from the French by Robert Motherwell in *Dada Painters and Poets*, by Robert Motherwell, New York, pp. 78-9. Leading Dadaists include Hans (Jean) Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, George Grosz, John Heartfield, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst, Francis Picabia, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Louis Aragon, Johannes Baader, Hugo Ball, André Breton, Jean Crotti, Paul Eluard, I.K. Bonset, Marcel Janco, Clément Pansaers, Tristan Tzara, Hans Richter and the lesser known – but one of my personal favourites - Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (née Else Plötz).

⁵ Biro, Mathew. *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, p. 50. Also I have been informed by Timothy Shipe, the curator of The International Dada archive at The University of Iowa, that the performance of Antisymphonie was held at the Graphisches Kabinett, Kurfürstendamm 232, at 7:45 PM. The printed program lists 5 numbers: "Proclamation dada 1919" by Huelsenbeck, "Simultan-Gedicht" performed by 7 people, "Brutistisches Gedicht" performed by Huelsenbeck (these latter 2 pieces grouped together under the category "DADA-machine"), "Seelenautomobil" by Hausmann, and finally, Golyscheff's Antisymphonie in 3 movements, subtitled "Musikalische Kriegsguillotine." The 3 movements of Golyscheff's piece are titled "provokatorische Spritze," "chaotische Mundhöhle oder das submarine Flugzeug," and "zusammenklappbares Hyper-fis-chendur."

⁶ Watts made a series of spray-painted records for a Fluxus performance at the Fluxstore on Canal Street played by the audience, and as the paint wore off, gradually the music was revealed.

⁷ Generally, his noise music is created from damaged LP recordings: often cut and glued together or painted over or melted. Hungarian constructivist László Moholy-Nagy did similar noise experiments in the 1920's.

⁸ *viral symphony* is a collaborative electronic noise music symphony created by the digital artist Joseph Nechvatal. It was created between the years 2006 and 2008 using custom artificial life C++ software based on the viral phenomenon model. It is 1 hour and 40 minutes in length. See: *Artística de Valencia, After The Net*, 5 – 29 June 2008, Valencia, Spain: catalogue: *Observatori 2008: After The Future*, p. 80. *viral symphony* is freely downloadable from the net here: <http://www.wmturnergallery.com/blog/?p=61>

paintings' paint application where an air-gun/air-nozzle pigment delivery system driven by a computer program sprays and stains the canvas support. There is no 3D texture other than the minuscule one provided by the canvas weave. There is no "crouste" - as the French say (which means crust). Thus my art creates a single case in point based on the essential nature of digital virtuality. Making the concept of the virtual visually perceivable in the actual terms of natural light and real time is achieved through a process of creating a visual integration – a process that I have termed the *viractual*, which is a state neither pure nor impure – but complete.

Peter Macsovszky: It is said that the history of art could be divided to the period before Duchamp and to them one after him. Of course, it is a simplification, but still: sometimes it is quite difficult to imagine really important art after Duchamp. On the other hand, the majority of audience is still not mature enough to understand the conceptual art and Duchamp. The phenomenon of Duchamp is about the conflict or dialogue between visual and mental. Where is your art in this, let's say, conflict?

Joseph Nechvatal: As Duchamp said, the fact that ready-mades are regarded with the same reverence as objects of art probably means he failed to solve the problem of trying to do away entirely with art. So I place my art in the post-Duchampian category. This is immediately made evident in the title of my September 2010 show in Paris at Galerie Jean-Luc & Takako Richard: *Art Rétinal Revisité: Histoire de l'Oeil September*. Speaking most generally: the body of work brought together under the title *Art Rétinal Revisité: Histoire de l'Oeil* came into existence through a theoretical investigation into the role of noise in culture. This research adapted the audio noise understanding of noise music and applies it to visual art, architecture, and consciousness in a new book I have written entitled *Immersion Into Noise* - published by Open Humanities Press. A digital version of the book *Immersion Into Noise* is being included in the sale of the painting/animation assemblages that will be exhibited in this show. The question I wish to put forth with this exhibition is: On a planet that is increasingly technologically linked and globally mediated, how might visual noises break and reconnect in distinctive and productive ways within practices located in the world of art and thought? For many, if anything is representative of the art of today it is ambivalence. Ostensibly, everything today is permitted in art – and thus nothing is necessary. As a result, art and entertainment, it is said, have merged. Perhaps surprisingly, for me, the denial of this merger and the answer to the question posed above is to be found within the challenge of a noise style that strengthens unique personal powers of imagination and critical thinking through a beautiful self-perception. So in a way, this show is about looking at looking. This approach was based on my observation that a noisy cultural constructivism is in the process of confronting unconnected ideal models of entertainment with information processing and self-re-organization through the digitalization of knowledge. I have tried to explore such questions through the connection between noise and violence and noise and the sacred. Noise may break some connections, but connections will always continue to grow in other directions; creating new thoughts and new affects. The

notion of noise as creation itself is thus an important one that needs to be reconsidered and reevaluated. Viral animations coupled with the canvases represent this function. More specifically, *Art Rétinal Revisited (Retinal Art Revisited)* points quite obviously to Marcel Duchamp's position that art that appeals to the intelligence (the mind) cannot as well appeal to the eye. I disagree with him here. Intelligent art need not be anti-retinal. Beautiful woman can be incredibly smart, as well. Georges Bataille's theories of excess are a key reference in my noise vision book sketched out above. That is why I honor his erotic fiction *Histoire de l'Oeil (Story of the Eye)* in the subtitle of the exhibition. For Bataille, excess is the non-hypocritical human condition, which he took as being roused non-productive expenditure (excess) entangled with exhilaration. Excess is, for Bataille, not so much a surplus as an effective passage beyond established limits, an impulse that exceeds even its own threshold. Engaged sight works that way as well, as there is always something more to see.

